

San Francisco: Silicon Valley's Ghetto

Big American cities have a shameful history of setting up smaller ones into which to punt the workers who make their city run. In *Amazing Grace*, Jonathan Kozol writes heart-wrenchingly about life in East St. Louis. And a little closer to home, in the shining Valley city of Palo Alto, the workers and their families (as usual, mostly people of color) are shunted into East Palo Alto at the end of the day.

Not only does this keep the workers and their families out of sight and out of crime, but it has beneficial political effects too. The workers may elect their own mayor, who is economically powerless to do anything about their plight, and they may attend their own school system, maintaining the new racial and economic segregation of American schools. (Incidentally, Stanford recently purchased East Palo Alto High School so it can run experiments on the poor children.)

It would be absurd and offensive to compare life in San Francisco to life in these impoverished neighborhoods, but I can't help but feel there are some structural similarities. Whatever else San Francisco is, it is a reaction to the Valley. Many of the people I've met here are doing their best to escape their stifling Silicon Valley jobs, taking the bus or train or car every day into work, then running back as soon as they can.

The result is that San Francisco ends up being something like the opposite of the Valley. The Valley has its clean if gray office buildings in neat squares; San Francisco has its rough and random dirty shops and houses drizzled across hillsides. The Valley is full of conservative corporate behavior; San Francisco is full of left-wing activists. The Valley is where people work, so San Francisco is where they play, throwing frisbees in parks and hanging out in coffee shops or going to dance parties at night. The Valley is a place of businesslike behavior; in San Francisco people hug deeply when they meet. (Not everyone, of course; none of this is everyone, but more than enough to be noticeable.)

The result, like some Marxist dialectic, is that neither the City nor the Valley really feel real. Both are reacting against each other, playing off their faults, waiting for some synthesis to put the pieces back together. The result is, to be sane you have to be in both.

City people refer to Palo Alto as Shallow Alto, which might even be literally true. The city is a thin strip of road, surrounded on one side by houses and on the other by offices, with Stanford behind it and other cities in front. It is, perhaps, a decent place to work — the finest upscale fakery you can find along relatively clean streets where even the homeless are white — but it's apparently a terribly boring place to live.

Meanwhile the city is all action. People are "intellectually lazy" here, complains one resident. You can zip around on bikes and scooters, drop into parties and nightclubs, gab with friends, eat good food, stroll by shops, do everything but actually get work done. People here are fleeing from work, not looking for it.

And so, to live, you ping-pong back and forth. A job you hate in the Valley, but you have to keep it so that it pays the exorbitant rent in the City, which you have to live in to escape the deadliness of the Valley. High highs, low lows, bright nights, dark days.

I suspect the City works as an escape valve in other ways. Instead of unionizing your big corporate employer, you simply flee to a False Profit party, secure in your anti-capitalist sentiment. Instead of working to build a better life, you go out dancing with your friends, trying to enjoy the little time you have.

Which, I have to say, is better than most. Most office drones just go home and watch TV, their work having drained from them the energy for any more productive activity. I suspect some of the difference lies in the peculiar economics of the computer industry. The people in it are unusually smart and talented. And the barriers to entry are so low that if they wanted to they could start their own thing (and, as the startup world shows, many do). So perhaps one has to "heighten the distractions" to keep them busy.

But who knows? I've got a party to get to.

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